



# The Finnish National Dialogues

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Finnish National Dialogues were set up as a rapid and creative response to the Covid-19 crisis and is the unique co-operational effort of national government and various agents of civil society. Starting in mid-April 2020, the dialogues provide the opportunity for citizens to come together to share their experiences, learn from one another, and build trust in the nation's ability to steer through the crisis. From the very beginning, particular attention has been paid to inviting the participation of people from different demographic groups, especially individuals in vulnerable circumstances. All dialogues are documented and then used to build a comprehensive overall view which is published and utilized in different ways by the national government, municipalities, and agents of civil society.

### THE FINNISH NATIONAL DIALOGUES IN NUMBERS:

*Between April and June 2020*

*162 dialogues*

*Over 1,100 participants*

*Over 80 actors were involved in organising the dialogues:*

- *civil-society organisations*
- *municipalities*
- *ministries*
- *religious communities*
- *companies*
- *individual citizens*

## 2. WHAT IS DIALOGUE?

By dialogue we mean a specific type of discussion, the main of which is to enhance people's ability to learn from one another. Dialogue, therefore, is different from debating, negotiating or aiming at consensus. The kind of learning that occurs in dialogue is a constantly developing understanding of the world's phenomena, other people, and oneself. People engaged in this sort of shared learning develop the kind of mutual trust that is crucial for the functioning of democracy. Furthermore, by their very structure, dialogical discussions uphold the ideals of equality and freedom. Dialogue is also a creative way to develop the new ideas required to solve the complex issues that beset modern societies.<sup>1</sup>

Dialogical discussions have integral significance in democracy because they have profound effects on the lives of communities and individuals. When we discuss together how we experience our shared world, we obtain a broader and more versatile picture of the issues at hand. Dialogue also enables us to notice and to respect each other's differences, and it helps us to realise how differences in experience can enrich our shared life. Thus, dialogues bind individuals and communities together without seeking to remove the differences that shape individuality.

Dialogue becomes crucial in situations where the issues under discussion are complex or emotionally charged and where individuals' experiences of them are very different. When citizens become distanced from one another, trust diminishes and misunderstandings grow. Whenever this occurs it becomes difficult to hold on to democratic values and to efficiently solve societal problems. Furthermore, the world's current crises are so

broad, complex and unpredictable, that solving them comprehensively cannot be done without a form of broad civic action that would entirely reshape politics. Dialogue is needed, therefore, on all levels of society, from local communities to global political decision-making.

### 3. THE CONCEPT AND ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE FINNISH NATIONAL DIALOGUES

The Finnish National Dialogues offer citizens and communities the possibility to take part in constructive dialogues throughout the strain of the current crisis. The concept is to hold a regular series of discussions that will continue for as long as necessary and will help to build an understanding of what it is like to live under such unusual circumstances.

Any organisation and even individual citizens can take part in organising a dialogue at any time they want. All dialogue organisers are provided with support materials (Timeout tools and other materials) and an introductory meeting online, while dialogue facilitators are offered peer group meetings. It is crucial to emphasise that the dialogue organisers have full control over and responsibility for the practicalities and content of the dialogues. They are the main actors in this nationwide entity.

Every citizen is invited to participate in the dialogues. Particular attention, however, is paid to assure that people from different demographic groups are invited to participate, especially individuals in vulnerable circumstances. This is made possible by the help of various NGOs working with groups of disadvantaged and marginalised people.

Details concerning the schedules and those organising the dialogues are displayed well before the dialogues take place. The dialogues are carried out either online or face to face, according to valid instructions from authorities. Each dialogue is documented, and a report is sent to the steering group, which then compiles a resumé of the discussions.

The collated dialogues help to form a comprehensive overall view of how different communities and individuals have been experiencing these unprecedented circumstances: what are their challenges and what are the strengths they have to meet them, as well as how public authorities are responding to the continuously changing situation. The resúmes of these dialogues may be utilised in different ways by the state and municipalities and can also aid the work of different agents within civil society.

The Finnish National Dialogues are coordinated by the steering group, which is responsible for planning, guiding, negotiating and publishing the dialogue resúmes.

In addition to the steering group, there is a task group in charge of the practical arrangements of the dialogues on a national level. The main functions of the task group are to support the multiple organisers and facilitators of the dialogues and to update webpages containing the list of upcoming dialogues, the support materials available for organisers, and the published resúmes. The ethos of the Finnish National Dialogues is to engender and to maintain an open, flexible and co-creative process whereby all those involved constantly learn from one another and from their joint action.

### 4. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DIALOGUES: THE TIMEOUT MODEL

The dialogues are implemented by using the Timeout model. This model was originally developed by the Finnish Innovation Fund (SITRA) and entails various tools for organising and facilitating constructive discussions. Timeout-tools are available for everyone to use on the Timeout Foundation's webpages.<sup>2</sup> The Timeout model can be used by activists, enterprises, organisations, schools and universities, the media, politicians, and those representing municipalities, political parties or local and regional governments. In addition to this, some specific tools and materials have been created to facilitate online dialogues in a crisis situation.

Timeout dialogue is always a facilitated discussion, with the facilitator ensuring that the discussion is constructive. The principal tool of Timeout provides the ground rules for a constructive dialogue.

#### **THERE ARE SIX GROUND RULES FOR TIMEOUT DIALOGUE:**

**Listen** to others, do not interrupt or start discussions on the side.

**Join** in what others say and use everyday language.

**Tell** about your own experience.

**Address** others directly and ask them about their views.

**Be present and respect** others and the atmosphere of trust.

**Search and build.** Work on the emerging conflicts boldly and look for what remains under the surface.

For the National Dialogues on the Covid-19 crisis some additional guidelines are given to all the organisers. For example, organisers are asked to appoint someone to act as a scribe to take notes on the discussion. The participants are informed of the notetaking and the use of these notes in building the national resumé of all the dialogues. In addition, the organisers are all asked to structure the discussion around two main questions.

1. What are you worried about at present?
2. What makes you feel hopeful or confident at the moment?

Besides this, organisers are encouraged to amend the dialogues to suit their particular needs. This means that they can emphasise topics that are especially significant for them and their participants. At the same time, it is essential to uphold the principle aim of dialogue, which is to build a better understanding of the topics, of others and oneself without pressure to arrive at any immediate solution.

## 5. INITIATING NATIONAL DIALOGUES IN A CRISIS SITUATION

The decision to organise the Finnish National Dialogues was made quickly. During the winter of 2019-2020, a group of civil servants from the Public Governance Department at the Ministry of Finance were trained by the Dialogue Academy to facilitate Timeout dialogues. They had already facilitated some face-to-face dialogues when the Covid-19 lockdown resulted in the cancellation of the remaining dialogues scheduled for the spring. On 20.03.2020, the Dialogue Academy presented to them the idea of organising together a series of online national dialogues, based on both the Timeout model and on the new tools the company had created for facilitating dialogues in acute crisis situations.

The swift launch of the initiative was made possible due to the valuable experience of the staff of the Dialogue Academy and the Timeout Foundation in organising a dialogue campaign at a national level. They had already organised an event in January 2019 called National Timeout Day, during which dialogues on climate change took place around the country. Based on that experience they had a ready-made format for recruiting actors to organise dialogues, practices to support them with the necessary guidance, and an existing network to call upon.

The idea was warmly welcomed, and permission and support immediately given, by the senior management of the Ministry of Finance. The Government of Finland together with the President of the Republic had just

declared a state of emergency over the Covid-19 outbreak. The idea of the Finnish National Dialogues aligned with the goals of the ministry to enhance different forms of dialogue to strengthen trust between different actors in society. The first round of the National Dialogues took place on 16.04.2020 and consisted of 27 dialogues with over 200 participants in total. The number of organised dialogues and the number of participants grew in the following sets of dialogues, which were organised every second week until the summer break.

In order to organise the Finnish National Dialogues, a steering group consisting of representatives of the Dialogue Academy, the Ministry of Finance and the Timeout Foundation was set up. The members of the steering group act as equal partners and the amount of bureaucracy is minimised.

One factor enabling the fast launch of the Finnish National Dialogues was the high level of internet usage and the level of human capital, with 76% of the population having basic or above basic digital skills, considerably above the EU average (DESI 2020 Country Report Finland). Organizing and participating in the National Dialogues did not, however, require any advanced high-tech solutions. Most were organised using online platforms such as Skype, Teams or Zoom, and some even by group calls on mobile phones.

## 6. DIALOGUE REPORTS ARE USED IN MANY WAYS

The resumé of the dialogue discussions were published online for anybody interested to read and use after each dialogue. A public communication was also made about the resumé in the form of press releases, articles and newsletters. The resumé of every dialogue week provided a snapshot of the feelings, worries and hopes of the dialogue participants. In this way, they provided the national government with important information on how the situation was evolving in Finland. The information published in the resumé could also be used by other actors, such as municipalities and civil-society organisations.

These resúmes were fruitful for the national government in many ways. They provided information that would not have been possible to obtain by more traditional forms of listening to or engaging citizens. The information was used, for instance, as background material to the national co-ordination of the Covid-19 pandemic. Early on in the spring, the Ministry of Finance saw that in addition to tackling the immediate crisis there was a need to start preparing quickly for the exit and recovery

strategies. The dialogue resumés, in consultation with civil-society organisations, formed one part of the information base for this work in spring 2020. During the summer, more work was built around exit strategy and resilience. It was concluded here that the dialogues were important for maintaining and strengthening trust. Consequently, a proposal was made to enhance dialogue competencies within the government and to ensure wider use of the dialogue method.

One key target group for the dialogue resumés is public sector leadership. The information gained from the dialogues is important background data for all areas of the public sector. Hence, the links to the resumés were sent to all highest-level leaders in the national government. This was achieved via an e-newsletter specifically addressed to the highest civil servant leaders in ministries and agencies. In order to reach municipal leaders as well, the information was also sent to municipal networks.

In the Ministry of Finance, the dialogue resumés became part of the steering of governance policy reforms. In particular, they were used in drafting the Open Government Strategy 2030 for Finland.

## 7. WHAT NEXT?

The work on resilience that took place in summer 2020, alongside the work on Open Government Strategy, resulted in the dialogues becoming a core priority within the Open Government Strategy. The first priority of this strategy being: "Open government reinforces dialogue in society". The objective, therefore, is to strengthen the role of dialogue for governmental action and to reinforce interactive professional skills in the public sector.

The Finnish National Dialogues have drawn attention both to the need to enhance dialogue skills and to the need for and possibility of using dialogue much more in government. During the autumn of 2020, the Timeout dialogues are used, for instance, in the futures work of the Prime Minister's Office in regional events organised around the country. They have also been part of a Civil Society Academy Day, organised jointly by civil-society organisations and the open government team of the Ministry of Finance to enhance networking and to develop civil servants' knowledge of the roles and functions of civil-society organisations. Furthermore, the dialogues were part of a virtual regional tour concerned with "Building Trust" which aimed at enhancing dialogue between leaders of municipalities and national government.

The dialogues are not necessarily a result or a method appropriate for every situation. In the national government

they have, nonetheless, proven to be a highly valuable tool for many occasions. Furthermore, the civil servants involved have found the dialogues to be a very meaningful part of their work, providing them with new methods to use in enhancing trust and developing open government.

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"The dialogue has brought us together and been an empowering experience."

*Laurea University of Applied Sciences, the Association for Rural Culture and Education*

"This is a school that teaches you patience, as you never know what is going to happen the next day."

*The Evangelic-Lutheran parishes of Tampere and the Diocese of Tampere*

"People's fears have become visible. This is acceptable and increases our humanity."

*Tiina and Antti Herlin Foundation*

"This will hopefully change our behaviour in a good way."

*The Finnish Central Association of Families of People with Mental Illness, FinFami*

"During the first two weeks, I was not sure what I was concerned about: myself, my loved ones or the world?"

*Active Citizens in Society – YAK*

"The dialogue has created an understanding of, or an insight into, communality and shared concerns, feelings and will."

*Finnish Pensioners' Federation*

"The dialogue created an incredible feeling of trust. If I had to choose three important concepts to describe it in plain Finnish, I would pick peer support, feeling connected, and therapeutic effects."

*The Cultura Foundation*

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The co-ordinating organisations of the Finnish National Dialogues would also like to use this opportunity to sincerely thank all the organisations and individuals who have been involved in the dialogues either as participants, facilitators or organisers.

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Kai Alhanen (2019). *Dialogue in Democracy*. Books on Demand.

<sup>2</sup> [www.timeoutdialogue.fi](http://www.timeoutdialogue.fi)